



2139 Silas Deane Highway
Suite 205
Rocky Hill, CT 06067
(860) 257-8066

Karen Bullock, Ph.D., LCSW
Stephen A Karp, MSW, Executive Director
naswct@naswct.net

Testimony on H. B. 6389

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General Law Committee

Submitted by: Stephen Karp, MSW, Executive Director

My name is Stephen Karp and I am the executive director of the National Association of Social Workers, CT Chapter, and a member of the Office of Health Care Advocate Advisory Board. NASW/CT representing over 3,300 members opposes the proposed merger of the Office of Health Care Advocate (OHA) into the Department of Consumer Protection. We recognize the need and logic to consolidate certain state agencies, but this is not one of them. There is neither a cost savings to the state nor an increase in efficiencies of service delivery by this proposed merger.

The Office of Health Care Advocate was created by the Legislature specifically as an independent office for the purposes of: educating consumers on their health care options, educating and advocating for consumers rights within the health care system, representing consumers who face denials of care, advising the Legislature on health care issues, and proposing health care policies to improve health care systems in Connecticut. Most recently the office has had the added function of providing support services for the Sustinet Board and various advisory committees. These roles do include consumer protection but go far beyond that of consumer protection, and as such are not a good match to the purposes of the Department of Consumer Protection.

Having been one of the individuals involved in proposing the legislation for what was then the Office of Managed Care Ombudsman, I can tell you that having an independent office was one of the most critical aspects of our design. To have the Office merged into a larger executive branch department and reporting to an executive branch commissioner was exactly what we sought to avoid simply because the Office cannot fully function unless it has the independence to advocate for the best interest of consumers, even when that interest may run counter to the desires of any given state administration. Insurers and the executive branch has ample authority and influence, which at times needs to be balanced by an independent voice. In the realm of health care that all important independent voice is the Office of Health Care Advocate.

Connecticut should take great pride in our Office of Health Care Advocate, which has become a national model that other states are replicating. In fact, the Office's independence and effectiveness allowed OHA to attain a significant federal grant to advance its work on consumer protection. To now reverse this progress and undermine the Office's effectiveness through a merger would truly be a major step backwards for our State's health care consumers and policy makers.

Another major downside to this merger is that OHA by definition of its work with insurers, and between consumers and insurers needs to be able to work very closely with the Insurance Department (DOI). The current arrangement whereby the Office is located in the Department of Insurance (DOI) facilitates this crucial inter-organizational relationship. To move the Office to the Department of Consumer Protection will

interfere in the necessary workings between OHA and DOI. Such a move will ultimately have the effect of disadvantaging consumers who use OHA and depend on OHA's ability to work and negotiate with DOI.

Finally, we see no real savings to the State of Connecticut, in terms of dollars or efficiencies. OHA is funded by fees paid by insurers and the Office's independence allows for the efficient functioning that OHA has come to be known for, both in Connecticut and nationally. State agency mergers should be driven by cost savings and/or increased inefficiencies of which you get neither by the proposed merger.

We urge the Legislature to maintain the independence of the Office of Health Care Advocate.